DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 316 136 HE 023 249

AUTHOR	Carr, David L.
TITLE	Responsibility in Professional Life.
INSTITUTION	American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Washington, D.C.; Saint Cloud State Univ., MN.
SPONS AGENCY	Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	90
NOTE	13p.; This report is one of a group gathered by the AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project, funded by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in collaboration with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education. For related documents, see HE 023 199-261.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Case Studies; *Curriculum Development; Demonstration Programs; Ethics; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Liberal Arts; Models; Moral Values; *Professional Education; Professional Occupations; Program Descriptions; Seminars; State Universities; *Teacher Responsibility; Teacher Role; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS	*AASCU ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project; Professionalism; Responsibility in Professional Life; *Saint Cloud State University MN

ABSTRACT

Responding to increasing concern about the ethical behavior of professionals, St. Cloud State University (in Minnesota) launched a program in 1986 that is a multidisciplinary effort to integrate material on professional ethics throughout the university at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The program has attracted 30 faculty members from 24 disciplines. The approach taken involves four central elements: (1) a faculty ethics seminar; (2) introduction of topics into existing courses and development of new courses; (3) working with practitioners to develop case studies as the focus of classroom activity; and (4) development of an all-university seminar to provide more advanced work and bring together professionals from a variety of areas to consider the common nature of ethical dilemmas. These elements have been successful in preparing faculty from professional disciplines to integrate ethics into traditional courses, developing realistic case studies that have stimulated student interest in professional ethics, and developing an action-oriented, ethical analysis strategy for students to follow in confronting ethical dilemmas. The approach may represent a new model for integrating professional and liberal arts education, one in which introductory exposure is provided in the context of professional training and followed up by an in-depth exploration in a traditional liberal arts course. (Author/MSE)

ED316136

RESPONSIBILITY IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE

A Project Funded by

The Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education

St. Cloud State University
David L. Carr, Project Director

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory is a two-year project seeking to establish and test a model system for collecting and disseminating information on model programs at AASCU-member institutions--375 of the public four-year colleges and universities in the United States.

The four objectives of the project are:

- To increase the information on model programs available to all institutions through the ERIC system
- To encourage the use of the ERIC system by AASCU institutions
- To improve AASCU's ability to know about, and share information on, activities at member institutions, and
- To test a model for collaboration with ERIC that other national organizations might adopt.

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project is funded with a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, in collaboration with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education at The George Washington University.

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ABSTRACT

Responsibility in Professional Life

St. Cloud State University

David L. Carr, Project Director

Responding to increasing concern regarding the ethical behavior of professionals, St. Cloud State University launched a program entitled "Responsibility in Professional Life" in 1986. The program, funded by the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, is a multi-disciplinary attempt to integrate material on professional ethics throughout the university at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Thus far, the program has attracted the participation of 30 faculty members from 24 separate disciplines.

The approach taken involves four central elements: a faculty ethics seminar, the introduction of topics in professional ethics into existing courses (as well as the development of new courses), working with practitioners to develop case studies which serve as the foci of classroom activity, and the development of an all-university seminar to provide more advanced work and to bring together professionals from a variety of areas to consider the common nature of ethical dilemmas.

These elements have been successful in preparing faculty from professional disciplines to integrate ethics into traditional courses, in developing realistic case studies which have stimulated student interest in professional ethics, and in developing an action-oriented, ethical analysis strategy for students to follow in confronting ethical dilemmas. The approach may represent a new model for integrating professional and liberal arts education, one in which introductory exposure is provided in the the context of professional training and followed up by an in-depth exploration in a traditional, liberal arts course.

I. Introduction

Professional ethics has enjoyed a dramatic increase in interest over the past few years, largely as a result of widely publicized situations in which professional behavior has been called into question. This new interest in professional ethics has generated a number of programs, centers, and research institutes which are devoting themselves to exploring the ethical behavior of professionals in virtually every field.

The experience of these institutions and organizations, as well as the experiences of those who have tried to act ethically in unethical organizational environments, suggests that the task of teaching ethical behavior is difficult at best. All too often such attempts have degenerated into self-interested, "how-to-avoid-being-sued" courses. The material below describes one attempt to integrate the teaching of professional ethics into the academic preparation of the next generation of professionals in many different fields. It might usefully be described as ethics across the curriculum.

The materials distill the approach we have taken into its basic elements, review the focus and success of our efforts, and make suggestions for replicating our approach at other institutions.

II. Background

American society has experienced a number of "crises" or disasters which have raised questions regarding the ethical behavior of professionals. These events call into question the adequacy of professionals' preparation to confront the social and ethical dimensions of professional practice.

Several factors have contributed to this situation:

1. The increasing emphasis on specialization and technical competence which is frequently reinforced by the demands of professional accrediting bodies.

2. The decline in the general education core during the 1960s and 1970s.

3. The mistaken assumption that, even where solid general education programs exist, that these will adequately prepare students to confront ethical dilemmas while simultaneously fulfilling countless other purposes.

4. The task orientation of professional programs, exemplified but not limited to education, medicine, and law.

5. The isolation of professional programs from one another which has discouraged consideration of the nature of professionalism in general.

6. The tendency of some professional ethics programs to degenerate into "how-to-avoid-being-sued" programs, rather than taking a more proactive stance towards ethical behavior.

7. The tendency of students in professional or pre-professional programs to take many of their electives in fields closely tied to their professional discipline.

This problem and its contributing causes suggest a clear need for integrating ethics into professional education at both the graduate and undergraduate level. In particular, they suggest an approach which will:

1. be supported by professional faculty;

2. be integrated into existing professional curricula, rather than standing alone as a separate entity;

3. be interdisciplinary; and,

4. will be action oriented (i.e., rather than just teaching ethical theory, the program should have as its goal more ethical practice).

III. Description

Grant Activities

The project is organized around the following central elements: a faculty ethics seminar, the introduction of topics on professional ethics into existing courses (as well as the development of new courses), working with practitioners to develop case studies which will be the focus of classroom discussion of professional ethics, and the development of an all-university seminar in professional ethics which brings together students from several disciplines.

The faculty ethics seminar was designed to introduce faculty to ethical theory and principles as well as preparing them to develop case studies in conjunction with practitioners from their fields. It lasted one academic quarter, meeting once per week, and was taught by a member of the philosophy department.

The introduction of topics on professional ethics into existing courses formed the basis of the project undertaken by each participating faculty member from a professional discipline. The focus was on courses that were a required part of a curriculum or, in some cases, entirely new courses were developed. The particular topic(s) chosen emerged from the faculty ethics seminar and from the faculty member's interaction with a practitioner which they identified.

Each participating faculty member identified a practitioner from their field and worked with this practitioner to develop one or more case studies which served as the focal point for introducing professional ethics

into their courses. This approach provided a sense of realism, the practitioners serving as credible spokespersons for the importance of professional ethics; and, the cases were recorded in one of several different formats for use in subsequent classes.

The all-university seminar was developed by the philosophy department and aimed at students who were interested in work which was more advanced and interdisciplinary in scope.
It was designed by the philosophy department and was a dual numbered, graduate/undergraduate course. One of its most important functions was to get students out of their disciplinary boundaries so they could see the similarities in ethical dilemmas across disciplines.

In addition to these main foci, the grant involved a number of supplementary activities designed to support and enrich the primary activities. These included the use of consultants from the fields of professional ethics, faculty retreats, the development of a special resource collection in the library, the development of a listing of ethics centers/programs around the country, and the development of cooperative arrangements with our instructional development division which were instrumental in assisting faculty to record their case studies. We are also developing a participant's handbook which will serve as a "refresher course" for faculty and a dissemination device.

Target Audience

The target audience was faculty and students in professional disciplines on our campus. Originally, the intent was to limit our focus to

graduate courses. However, it soon became apparent that many of our students were entering the professional world without graduate degrees, perhaps with the intent of pursuing them later. Furthermore, our interaction with practitioners suggested that frequently it is the entry level practitioner who first encounters or creates ethical dilemmas. Therefore, beginning in the second year of the grant we included undergraduate students (and courses) as well as graduate students. This expansion of our target audience also explains why we chose to make the all-university seminar a dual numbered, graduate-undergraduate course.

Scope

The project has been university-wide in scope, involving participants from all five of our constituent colleges. Thirty faculty have participated representing twenty-four disciplines.

Resources

The program was staffed by the project director (1/3 released time), part time student assistant, in-kind secretarial support, and a philosophy department liason. Resources devoted to the project over the three year period include $109,164 in federal support from the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) and $105,325 in institutional support (both direct and in-kind). Unanticipated, in-kind support came from the Instructional Development and Library Reserve divisions of our learning resource center.

IV. Results

Faculty Ethics Seminar. Based on responses to evaluation instruments, the faculty ethics seminar has proved to be very successful both in accomplishing its intended purpose and in producing some

unanticipated results. Faculty participants have found that the seminar prepared them to present the ethical materials in their classes. They particularly appreciated the balance between theory and application through case studies. The faculty also commented favorably on the connections they made with others throughout the university and on the opportunity to see that colleagues in very different disciplines faced similar pedagogical problems.

Working with Practitioners. This has been one of the most successful and enjoyable parts of the entire project. Both faculty and students have rated the opportunity to interact with practitioners as central to the quality of the experience. Much as we anticipated, the practitioners have a prima facie credibility with students that professors, even those in the professional disciplines sometimes lack. The response of the practitioners can be described as equally enthusiastic.

Integration of Ethics into Existing Courses. This has proved to be a successful strategy for exposing large numbers of students to the ethical issues in their future profession. Evidence does not indicate a dramatic change in attitudes, but our purpose was not indoctrination. However, two important things are happening to the students. First, they are realizing for the first time that they will encounter ethical issues in the practice of their profession. Second, they now have a more systematic approach to thinking about, and acting on these dilemmas. This latter phenomenon results from the ethical analysis model we have developed and taught in the faculty ethics seminar.

All-University Seminar. The all-university seminar has been successful in attracting students from throughout the university. As anticipated, most of the students enrolled in this course were first exposed

to professional ethics in one of our disciplinary-based courses. Student evaluation of the seminar has been very favorable, both formally and informally.

One unanticipated result has been the nature of the impact on student ethical reasoning. Students selecting to enroll in the course felt strongly about ethical issues and scored quite high on the Defining Issues Test developed by James Rest of the University of Minnesota. In many cases the post seminar scores were lower, indicating that the seminar has pointed out how complicated ethical decision making can be. This interpretation is consistent with informal student comments on teaching evaluations.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

Effectiveness. The program was successful both in achieving its intended outcomes and in terms of producing unanticipated benefits. As outlined above, the program succeeded in:

1. sensitizing students and faculty to the role of ethical decisions in the practice of their profession;

2. providing a model of ethical analysis which assisted students and faculty in thinking about ethical dilemmas;

3. tying ethical analysis to pragmatic concerns of implementing ethical decisions within the work setting without committing professional suicide;

4. demonstrating similarities in the ethical concerns of all professions through the all-university seminar;,

5. establishing an important resource base to support instruction in professional ethics across the campus; and,

6. establishing a network of interested faculty who are already beginning to involve others in professional ethics.

In addition to these direct outcomes, several important indirect outcomes have been achieved:

1. Participating in the project has been a substantial stimulus to professional development. Faculty have published articles, become more active participants in their professional associations, had numerous opportunities for sharing their experience with professional colleagues, and in some cases claim that the experience has sensitized them to the need for a re-examination of their teaching strategies.

2. The project has developed ties across the campus: among faculty and between departments/programs.

3. The development of ties to the community of practitioners has had "spill over" effects into other courses.

4. We may have developed a new approach to integrating professional and liberal arts education. That is, introducing liberal arts topics in professional courses followed by more detailed consideration of these topics in a traditional liberal arts setting.

Maintaining Focus. The success of this project is tied to a number of critical conditions. These include:

1. developing and maintaining a cooperative relationship with the philosophy department

2. the use of practitioners as credible spokespersons for the importance of ethical issues in the profession

3. tying project activities into the existing faculty evaluation system to create incentives for high quality participation

4. carefully choosing the right people from professional faculties

5. arranging understandings about when courses will be developed and taught

Replicability. It is reasonable to expect that other institutions could replicate our experience, either building on our efforts and taking advantage of resources we have developed; or, simply using our approach and establishing a variation of our program which fits the institutional setting. Some funding would be appropriate to underwrite start-up costs. The minimum needed is probably around $30,000, of which about two-thirds would be hard cash. These funds could come from a combination of internal and external sources. For those institutions located near other institutions, cooperative ventures might substantially lower costs to any participating institution.